

## THE PUBLIC AND ITS BELIEFS

THE ROLE OF THE public in the foreign policy process is a most misunderstood, difficult, and important topic in the complex politics of U.S. foreign policy. It is misunderstood because observers tend to make sweeping generalizations, particularly asserting the insignificance of the public and its beliefs in foreign policy. It is difficult because it is a complex topic involving different types of publics holding different kinds of beliefs which indirectly, as well as directly, affect the policymaking process. Finally, it may be the most important topic because the public—what the American people believe and how they behave—sets the social context and domestic political boundaries within which the government and the policymaking process must operate. This chapter discusses the public's beliefs about the world and its influence on foreign policy, while chapters 12, 13, and 14 concentrate on the public's direct participation in the political process. Examination of the public and its beliefs provides a foundation for understanding continuity and change, presidential governance, and the tensions between national security and democracy in the making of U.S. foreign policy.

### THE TRADITIONAL WISDOM

The common view held by most observers of American politics, as well as most Americans, is that the public plays a relatively insignificant role in the making of U.S. foreign policy. They posit that it does not matter what the public thinks about foreign policy issues, for it has little impact on the government and the policymaking process. Moreover, they say public indifference allows political leaders, especially the president, a great degree of freedom of action in foreign policymaking. Therefore, most observers of U.S. foreign policy focus on government policymakers and institutions in explaining how U.S. foreign policy is made, while ignoring the public and much of society.<sup>1</sup>

Why is the public portrayed as being relatively unimportant in the making of U.S. foreign policy? The traditional wisdom sees the public as uninterested and uninformed regarding foreign policy issues, "fickle" in its opinions, typically fluctuating day-by-day if not hour-by-hour, and responsive to political leadership, especially during times of crises. A more cynical, critical perspective perceives a public that is easily manipulated by political elites. Regardless of the language or the political perspective, many observers of U.S. foreign policy hold the opinion, shared by much of the general public, that the impact of the public is fleeting and usually unimportant in influencing policymakers.

This traditional view leads to a harsh conclusion about the tension between national security and democracy. Americans pride themselves on having developed a democratic society based on a republican system of government in which political leaders are selected by the people and are responsive and accountable to

the electorate. Yet, if the public role is minimal, and the public is extremely responsive to and easily manipulated by political leaders, then U.S. foreign policymaking is not as democratic as it may seem. Many observers and policymakers throughout American history, in fact, have held an "elitist" view of foreign policymaking, arguing that policymakers should be distanced from the public. Those who hold this view tend to fear that the public is an ignorant, emotional "mob" that, when mobilized, often counteracts the cold, rational calculations of national interest that national security demands.<sup>2</sup>

As with any stereotype, this traditional picture of the public holds much truth. The majority of the public is uninformed, fickle, and responsive to established leaders. These characteristics often have given the president great flexibility in governing foreign policy and have allowed the demands of national security to prevail over the demands of democracy. However, the American public and its beliefs are more complex than this simple picture suggests. While the traditional wisdom concerning the insignificance of public opinion may help explain some of the politics of foreign policy during the cold war era, this view obscures a full understanding of the politics of U.S. foreign policy, especially during the post-Vietnam War years.

#### A MORE COMPLEX AND CONSEQUENTIAL PUBLIC

Contrary to the traditional wisdom, in order to fully understand United States foreign policy during the cold war period and post-Vietnam War era, one must carefully examine the public and its role in domestic politics. "There is an American myth that politics stops at the water's edge, that the normal play of partisan competition and dissent gives way to unity in matters of foreign policy. This myth is unfounded but nevertheless potent." So states Leslie Gelb in *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*, where he argues that when it came to U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam "practical political imperatives against losing, as well as the shared foreign policy beliefs against losing, were very much on every President's mind"; in this sense the political system and democratic politics worked as intended.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, "academicians and public-opinion experts have helped to perpetuate the myth in their own way by 'demonstrating' that foreign policy simply is not a salient issue to the voter and that whatever the president says and does goes," while "official silence on the subject prevails." But, states Gelb, presidents have "known better. Citizens may not single out national security affairs as the basis for their votes—although war and peace issues often are so mentioned—but the security area inevitably plays an important part in determining their overall impression of how the President is doing his job. Moreover, communication leaders and 'elites' judge the President's performance with regard to national security, and the mood which they convey to the public affects public appraisals of the man in the White House."<sup>4</sup> Hence for Gelb, "American public opinion was the essential domino" affecting U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

A growing number of observers of U.S. foreign policy, like Leslie Gelb, have challenged the simple traditional view that the role of the American public in for-